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The Real Generation Gap

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Twice named professor of the year, Marianne M. Jennings has taught business as well as legal and ethical studies at Arizona State University since 1977. She has written more than one hundred articles and six books including *Business Strategy for the Political Arena,* which was selected in 1985 by *Library Journal* as one of the best guides to business/government relations.

She is also a columnist for the *Arizona Republic,* and her articles have appeared in the *Wall Street Journal,* the *Chicago Tribune,* and other newspapers around the country. A collection of her essays, *Nobody Fixes Real Carrot Sticks Anymore,* was published in 1994. In addition, Professor Jennings provides business commentary on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered* and serves on the board of such organizations as Arizona Public Service and the Center for Children with Chronic Illness and Disability.

As Marianne M. Jennings attests, there are few experiences more terrifying than discovering what today's students know and what they don't know. At best, Generation X appears to be ill-prepared for the responsibilities of adulthood and the challenges of modern life.

Professor Jennings' remarks were delivered during Hillsdale's Shavano Institute for National Leadership seminar, "Heroes for a New Generation and a New Century" in Scottsdale, Arizona, last February.

Born in 1980, today's college freshmen are part of "Generation X." They came into the world long after Vietnam, Richard Nixon, and Watergate. They never saw Senator Sam Ervin's eyebrows. Can you imagine? They were also born after *Saturday Night Fever*. They do not know John Travolta has had two movie careers. Nor do they know what it is like to live in a society in which marriage is the predominant social institution. Unfortunately, they do know about broken homes and "single-parent families." And they know what it is like to be the children of child care because 67 percent of them have mothers working outside their homes.

The members of Generation X know a lot about Madonna, Princess Diana, G.I. Jane, Michael Jackson, Michael Jordan, and Mike Tyson. They know nothing at all about Kate Smith, Mother Teresa, Rosie the Riveter, John Wayne, Babe Ruth, and Audie Murphy. Almost without exception, their favorite role models are the type of celebrities seen on MTV, ESPN, and the cover of *People*.

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HILLSDALE COLLEGE

One disturbing poll reveals that nearly 100 percent of today's youth can name the "Three Stooges," but not even 1 percent can name three justices on the U. S. Supreme Court. Seventy-three percent want to start their own businesses, but 53 percent voted for small business foe Bill Clinton. Only 19 percent attend church regularly. Only 1 percent include a member of the clergy on their lists of most admired individuals.

What all these statistics tell us is that the gap between generations is wider than ever before. There are five areas in which the gap is most pronounced: skills, knowledge, critical thinking, work, and morality.

Generation X is filled with self-esteem but bereft of knowledge.

The Skills Gap

Iowa test scores have been a standard measurement of academic achievement for many decades. And what they have been measuring lately is frightening. Students who should be scoring at the 90th percentile are barely scoring at the 70th; those who should be at the 70th are hovering between the 30th and 40th. Between 70 and 90 percent of all students entering the California State University system have to take some form of remedial course work in basic subjects like English and math. Eighty-seven percent of students entering New York community colleges flunk the placement test–they can't even pass the test that would put them into remedial courses! As New York Mayor Rudolph Guiliani observed several years ago, if skills actually determined entrance into the New York system of higher education, three of every four students would probably be denied admission. (The state has recently begun to administer such tests, and it appears that Guiliani was right.) It is also a matter of public record that national ACT and SAT college entrance test scores are steadily declining despite "adjustments" designed to boost them artificially.

Yet one-third of many high schools' students maintain 4.0 (straight A) grade point averages. Why? Because grade inflation, which occurs at every level of education, is rampant. My daughter Sarah has been in the public school system since the third grade, and she is living proof. She has consistently received good grades without the benefit of a good education.

When she enrolled in an algebra class in the eighth grade, I offered to help her with her homework. She took me up on this offer one evening when we were sitting together at the kitchen table. The first problem was: "What is 10 percent of 470?" I was stunned to discover that Sarah couldn't solve it without the aid of a calculator. Another problem involved determining 25 percent of a given figure. She not only didn't know the answer, but she didn't know that this percentage could be expressed as "one-quarter" or "one-fourth."

Here was my own flesh and blood–my straight-A student! I couldn't help asking, "Are the other kids this dumb?" Without missing a beat, Sarah replied, "Oh, they're much dumber." She may be right. On the most recent International Math and Science Survey, which tests students from 42 countries, one-third of all American high school seniors could not compute the price of a $1,250 stereo that was discounted by 20 percent.

The Knowledge Gap

Algebra is not the only area where today's students have trouble. Hillsdale College President George Roche writes, "Tens of thousands of students do not know when Columbus sailed to the New World, who wrote the Declaration of Independence, or why the Civil War was fought." Part of the problem is that most parents don't realize that what is being taught in modern public schools is actually widening the knowledge gap between them and their children.

One of the most popular history textbooks, produced as a result of the campaign for national education standards in the late 1980s, disparages the "Father of Our Country." George Washington was not, the authors of *The United States: In the Course of Human Events* contend, really successful as a soldier, as a politician, or as a human being. Much is made of Thomas Jefferson's subjective observation that Washington was possessed of "a heart that was not warm in its affections."

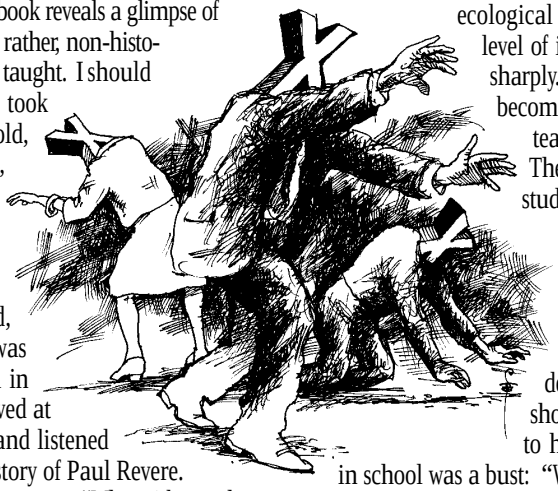
How is Generation X ever going to find out that Washington the general did more than any individual to win the war that established our nation? Or that Washington the president risked his reputation and his career to ensure that we would have limited government, a sound economy, and a virtuous citizenry? Or that Washington the man constantly performed acts of kindness and charity for others, including Jefferson? It certainly isn't going to learn such important lessons from a textbook that claims Washington was not much of a man because he did not, in modern lingo, "feel our pain."

Special sections in each chapter feature biographies of people who have made a difference in history. Almost all are politically correct

minorities and/or females. One, for example, is a female astronaut. The authors allege that she was unfairly excluded from Project Mercury because she had no flight experience. This, of course, is characterized as an insufficient reason to deny her the "right" to participate.

The 17th-century English philosopher John Locke is not mentioned–there is no room, evidently, to discuss his significant role in bringing about the Enlightenment or the American Revolution. Famous religious leaders are also ignored, although the authors do bow to the ancient gods of primitive peoples. Pre-Columbian cultures like the Toltecs are praised for their lavishly decorated temples, their calendars, their games–so what if they practiced human sacrifice?

This best-selling textbook reveals a glimpse of the version of history–or rather, non-history–Generation X is being taught. I should know. Last summer, I took Sarah, then 14 years old, on a tour of Boston, Massachusetts. I carefully explained the historic significance of each site to her. After several hours, she said, "Now, Mom, what war was this?" While I was still in a state of shock we arrived at the Old North Church and listened to a tour guide tell the story of Paul Revere. Sarah's question this time was, "What side was he on?" I asked incredulously, "What exactly did you do in the advanced placement U. S. history class you just completed?" Her response was, "I made a great many charts, and I did a lot of little projects with painting."



I do not mean to pick on Sarah. She and her peers are victims of a pernicious system that has turned traditional liberal arts education on its head. The situation is no better in higher education. At some colleges and universities, professors deliver lectures on the "The Apostle Paul as a Homosexual" and "Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto." Stanford University achieved notoriety a decade ago for its course, "Black Hair as Culture and History." A current survey on American religion at another school fails to mention Catholicism. One new cutting-edge psychology course is titled, "Gender Discrepancies and Pizza Consumption."

Before long, the loss of knowledge may even make simple conversation impossible. In my classroom, I cannot say, "Never look a gift horse in the mouth," or my students will give me a blank stare. I cannot say, "Me thinks thou dost protest too much," or at least one will inevitably respond, "Excuse me, Professor Jennings, shouldn't that be, 'I thinks?'" The literary shorthand of our culture is being lost. This is no small loss either, for words are symbols of important ideas.

The Critical Thinking Gap

Indoctrination is partly to blame for the knowledge gap. This is not a new trend in education. When I was in school, I was taught about "global cooling," and my teachers predicted that the earth was going to be frozen over in a new ice age. Today, my children are told that global warming is going to bring on an ecological apocalypse. But the level of indoctrination has risen sharply. Environmentalism has become an obsession with the teachers of Generation X. They constantly bombard students with dire warnings about pollution, scarce resources, and weather-related disasters. A recent cartoon sums up the attitude the students typically develop. It shows a little girl declaring to her mother that her day in school was a bust: "We didn't do anything to save mankind or the environment. We wasted the whole day on reading and math."

Indoctrination makes students passive receivers of information. As such docile participants, most public school students are incapable of independent thought–of drawing logical inferences or exhibiting other critical thinking skills. They are also incapable of looking at a statement and determining its validity. I refer to this as the "frou-frou head" problem, because students are so lacking in skills and knowledge and are so indoctrinated by politically correct thinking that they are not able to think clearly or make sound, well-informed judgments.

High school freshman Nathan Zohmer of Idaho recently conducted an experiment in science class that reveals the serious nature of this problem. He told classmates and teachers that they should sign his petition to ban a dangerous substance, "dihydrogen monoxide," which causes excessive vomiting and sweating. He informed them that dihydrogen monoxide is a component in acid rain. In its gaseous state, it can cause serious burns. Accidental inhalation can kill. To make

matters worse, it contributes to soil erosion, decreases the effectiveness of automobile brakes, and its presence has been detected in some terminal cancer tumors.

Forty-seven of the 50 students and teachers signed the petition with no questions asked. Not one thought to inquire, "Just what *is* dihydrogen monoxide?" If they had, they would have discovered they had signed a petition calling for a ban on H_20–water.

The Work Ethic Gap

Then there is the work ethic gap. In a recent survey, 80 percent of Generation X respondents said they want an active social life, while only 37 percent admit success at work is important. More adult males are living at home with their parents than at any time in our country's history. Why this staggering statistic? Moms and dads provide comfortable room and board while salaries can be used for fun. The desire for independence is missing along with the drive for achieving that independence.

There is no longer a stigma attached to joining the welfare rolls or reneging on financial obligations. Personal bankruptcies are at an all-time high. What is unique about these bankruptcies is the fact that the majority are not the result of the loss of a job or health problems; they involve one or two wage earners who have simply overextended themselves. Credit card debt, which has skyrocketed in recent years, is mainly held by those whose annual income exceeds $50,000. Evidently, the willingness to save and to delay gratification, the drive for success, and the concern for reputation are fast disappearing in a culture that condones irresponsible spending.

The average time for completion of a bachelor's degree is 5.5 years, so most students are not on a fast track. And they have developed some bad habits by the time they get into college. One is whining. As long as there have been students there has been whining–about workload, about subjects, about grades. But now there is *preemptive whining*. Even before the semester begins, even before papers and tests are handed back, students come into my office at Arizona State University with a laundry list of complaints.

Last year, one-third of my students protested their grades. In my first twenty years of teaching, not a single student questioned my judgment, but I expect half of my students to do so in the next ten. They are infected with an entitlement mentality. Good grades are not earned by hard work and subject mastery but by signing up to take the class.

I once counseled a graduate student who was doing poorly by saying: "Look, the problem is that you have a lack of depth when it comes to your studies. You have no knowledge base on which you can draw. You are going to have to start reading." He said with some surprise, "What do you mean? Books?"

> . . . 82 percent of all students believe that right and wrong are relative terms and that morality is a ridiculous concept.

A recent study analyzing the habits of elementary school children revealed that the average time spent on homework is ten minutes. Worse yet, the same study found that schools are increasingly adopting a "no homework" policy. Perhaps the saddest aspect of this situation is the reason more assignments are not given: Parents complain about the work their children are given.

Following last spring's final exams, a student came to my office and said, "You made us stretch to the maximum. It wasn't a bad feeling." Unfortunately, most students do not understand the pride that comes with conquering what seems to be impossible. Generation X is filled with self-esteem but bereft of knowledge.

In the math survey mentioned earlier, students from around the world were asked how they felt they had done upon completion of the exam. While the scores proved that the United States finished in the bottom third of all countries participating, it did finish first in terms of students' perception of personal performance. Americans exhibited the highest self-esteem while students from Japan and Singapore, who finished in the top two slots, were the least arrogant about their performance.

The Morality Gap

The most grievous problem is the morality gap. Sarah is a basketball player and a devoted fan of *Sports Illustrated*. Recently, she shared with me one of the magazine's top stories, which summarized a poll of one thousand Olympic athletes. One of the questions posed was, "If we could give you a drug that would guarantee your victory at the Olympic Games but would also guarantee your death in five years, would you take it?" Fifty-four percent said yes.

Another survey conducted by the Lutheran Brotherhood asked, "Are there absolute standards

for morals and ethics or does everything depend on the situation?" Seventy-nine percent of the respondents in the 18-34 age group said that standards did not exist and that the situation should always dictate behavior. Three percent said they were not sure.

If this poll is correct, 82 percent of all students believe that right and wrong are relative terms and that morality is a ridiculous concept. This is the den of lions into which I walk every day. It is called the modern American classroom.

When I finish teaching a course, I ask my students to fill out a written evaluation form. Many of them comment, "This business ethics class was really fascinating. I had never heard these ideas before." Mind you, I am not teaching quantum physics–I am presenting simple, basic ideas and principles that should be followed in the marketplace: Be honest. Treat other people the way that you want to be treated. Work hard. Live up to your obligations.

Generation X boasts thousands of techno-wise youth. But it is missing real wisdom, informed by a strong education and a strong spiritual ethic.

Comedian Jay Leno revealed during one of his street interviews on the *Tonight Show* that the same young people don't seem to know the Ten Commandments. What they do know about morality is what they have picked up in scattered, disconnected bits from parents, friends, television, and magazines. And a good deal of this is immoral rather than moral. As a result, Generation X lacks a solid moral foundation for its views on school, work, marriage, family, and community.

Closing the Generation Gap

Are there ways to close the yawning generation gap, which is really the sum of all these smaller gaps? Of course there are. We live in a miraculous age. Great changes have revolutionized the way we live. I started law school with an electric typewriter–state-of-the-art back then. Now I have a computer, a fax machine, and electronic mail. The tools of high technology allow for improved education, wider access to knowledge, more work productivity, and greater freedom to make moral decisions. But these same tools also demand greater personal responsibility.

Is Generation X ready? I don't know. Remember the 1986 disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in Ukraine? The world's worst nuclear accident did not happen because nuclear power is a flawed technology. It happened because a handful of young, cocky engineers chose to disregard established safety parameters while performing a routine test of equipment. Ironically, the test was designed to provide power to operate the reactor core cooling system in the event of an emergency. The engineers' carelessness and arrogance, which caused the release of large quantities of radioactive substances into the atmosphere, has since caused the death, pain, and suffering of innocent victims in Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia.

Look at what happened to Barings Bank, the venerable institution that financed the Napoleonic wars. It went bankrupt in 1995 because one trader, 28-year-old Nick Leeson, was able to sit in front of his computer and violate the prime ethical rule of banking: You don't take other people's money and recklessly gamble with it. He made a $27 billion bet that the Japanese stock market would rally after the Kobe earthquake. The market dropped instead, and Barings' losses reached a staggering $1.3 billion.

At the end of 1997, 29-year-old Marisa Baridis entered a guilty plea when she was charged with selling inside information. For $2,000 to $10,000 a tip, she and her friends made a dramatic impact on the stock market by using nonpublic information to take advantage of others. Ms. Baridis, who profited handsomely from such cheating, was the compliance officer for the investment bank and brokerage house of Morgan Stanley. She enjoyed a great deal of technological access to confidential information and a great deal of unilateral authority. In a tape-recorded conversation, she referred to insider trading as the "illegalist [sic] thing you can do," but, lacking the basic values of fairness and honesty, she easily dismissed the law she was responsible for enforcing. She also cost shareholders and companies millions of dollars.

High technology demands *more* individual judgment and *more* moral accountability. Generation X boasts thousands of techno-wise youth. But it is missing real wisdom, informed by a strong education and a strong spiritual ethic. When I point this out to some of my students and colleagues, they say, "Hey, don't shove that Judeo-Christian stuff down our throats! We don't want that." Then I remind them that this "stuff" exists

everywhere, and that it has been considered vital to civil society for centuries. I challenge them to name one country in the world where bribery and cheating are legal and approved by the populace. I tell them to examine the most basic ethical principles of Moses and Jesus and compare them to those of Aristotle, Confucius, and Mohammed. The major religions of the world are in agreement on certain universals that have stood the test of time.

One such standard of universal morality is what is referred to by Christians as the "Golden Rule": Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The same notion of fairness can be found in the basic tenets of Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, and even in philosophy in the form of Kant's "categorical imperative." Throughout time, this simple test of ethics has been recognized in various cultures as a means of preserving civility, decency, and morality. Its beauty lies in its simplicity. Its profundity lies in its universal recognition and adherence.

Most important, we must restore the twin notions that being judgmental is not the same as being narrow-minded and that expressing moral outrage is not a form of "hate speech." What a different world we would have if choosing right and rejecting wrong were not considered fanatical!

Parents as Teachers

As parents we have to stand up and be counted. When our children come home from school, as my daughter did one day, spinning yarns about Ethan Allen and the "Green Mountain Persons," we have to set the record straight. Truth matters. It was Ethan Allen and the "Green Mountain Boys," and this fact is not a slight to women. When pre-schoolers are exposed to storybooks on "alternative" lifestyles and early sex education (endorsed by the National Education Association, by the way), we must sound our objections loudly and clearly. We must exert pressure on superintendents, principals, and teachers. We must take the initiative and run for positions on school boards and city councils.

We must also seize moments of morality with our children to teach them the difference between right and wrong and impose punishments when they stray from moral principles. Most important, we must restore the twin notions that being judgmental is not the same as being narrow-minded and that expressing moral outrage is not a form of "hate speech." What a different world we would have if choosing right and rejecting wrong were not considered fanatical!

When I graduated from law school, a speaker offered nine words I have never forgotten: "Truth is violated by falsehood but outraged by silence." The past 25 years have been filled with falsehoods about our history and our culture. Generation X has never lived in a time of truth. Condemning immorality has become virtually the only sin, so it has not even witnessed the courage of conviction. We have been silent as an entire generation has seen truth repeatedly violated.

There is a difference between holding beliefs and being valiant in defending beliefs. As parents, struggling to close the generation gap, we must be valiant in defending our beliefs. Indeed, this is a call to action for all who guide our youth and offer them instruction. When immorality and adultery are described as "private" and therefore "irrelevant" in the public square, with no impact on character and leadership, we must shout from the rooftops, "Personal conduct *is* character! Character does matter!" When the lessons of history, literature, science, and religion are distorted, attacked, or lost in the shuffle, we must rescue them. It is time to break our silence and confront those who have perpetrated so many myths, so much fraud, and so little substance for so long.

It is still possible to reclaim Generation X from the hopelessly flawed indoctrination it has experienced. But reclaiming our children will require the type of introspection that results in moral courage and is followed by the expression of moral outrage. One of my students commented to me at the end of a semester, "You've dispelled so many myths. Now I know morality in business is not a crime." And I responded, "It's even better, son. Neither is the moral life a sin." Breaking our silence will allow truth to emerge, and its rare and illuminating quality will attract the attention and devotion of a generation trained and raised in amoral darkness.

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